

Federal hearing reveals chilling details of Trump administration's political targeting of PhD student Momodou Taal

Our reporter
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A hearing in federal court last month shed further light on the Trump administration's lawless campaign to deport Momodou Taal, a Cornell University Ph.D. candidate, for his political opposition to US and Israeli war crimes.

The *World Socialist Web Site* previously reported on the basic facts of the hearing, which was held on March 25. However, the official transcript has only recently become available, providing a devastating picture of the administration's efforts to criminalize political dissent and silence opposition to genocide.

Taal, a British-Gambian citizen, was forced to leave the US in the days after the hearing, fearing imminent seizure by the Trump administration. His case was heard in the Northern District of New York by Judge Elizabeth Coombe and centered on Taal's motion for a temporary restraining order (TRO) to block his deportation.

The government sought to retaliate against Taal, along with two co-plaintiffs, for filing a lawsuit against two of the Trump administration's executive orders: Executive Order 14161, which allegedly "protects the United States from foreign terrorists," and Executive Order 14188, which claims to combat "anti-Semitism" but in reality targets political opposition to Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Taal's lead attorney, Eric Lee, noted that the government openly acknowledged Taal's supposed "involvement in certain protests" as the formal justification for his removal proceedings.

"This is the apex of First Amendment activity," Lee said during the hearing. "Mr. Taal attended a protest. There could be nothing more important to protect under the First Amendment than that."

Lee emphasized that "case law from the Supreme Court says very clearly that he has the protection of the First Amendment while he's here and while that protest took place on US soil." Lee noted that Taal was being targeted not for any crime, but for exercising his constitutionally protected rights to free speech and protest.

"There's no ground of removability that says an individual can be removed because they were 'unreasonably loud' or attended a protest," Lee told the court, quoting from DHS (Department of Homeland Security) declarations. He added that the Trump administration's actions were "clearly viewpoint discrimination—they're not attacking people who attend protests in support of the present administration."

Lee pointed out the authoritarian implications of Trump's orders, explaining that the government was using them to monitor political speech and punish critics of US and Israeli policy.

He said:

The First Amendment cannot allow that type of a chill to be used by the Executive Branch.

The hearing revealed the government's admission that Taal's visa was revoked the day before he filed his lawsuit, and a Notice to Appear (NTA) was hastily issued to initiate removal proceedings. Lee argued that this was a transparent maneuver to strip the court of jurisdiction over the lawsuit against the executive orders.

He stressed that the injury to Taal and the two citizen co-plaintiffs—M?koma wa Ng?g?, a Cornell professor, and Sriram Parasurama, another US citizen—had already occurred prior to the filing of the lawsuit.

All three plaintiffs had curtailed their speech and association in fear of retaliation.

Lee said:

The fact that there's an NTA does not cure that, it doesn't make it any better. It's ongoing.

Judge Coombe also asked whether Taal could raise his constitutional claims during removal proceedings. Lee agreed that theoretically he could but underscored that “the First Amendment does not allow the government to put someone in detention for months or possibly longer” before vindicating their rights. “In the First Amendment context, it cannot go,” Lee said.

The hearing further revealed that the government’s justification for targeting Taal rests almost entirely on open-source surveillance of campus protests, under a program where agents proactively monitor speech. Homeland Security agent Roy Stanley admitted that HSI (Homeland Security Investigations) “proactively reviews open-source information” to identify individuals targeted by Trump’s executive orders.

Lee explained that Trump’s executive orders are not simply internal administrative measures. They are actively being used to sweep up immigrants who engage in political protest.

He cited Trump’s own words from the official White House fact sheet:

To all resident aliens who joined what he calls “pro-jihadist protests” ... come 2025, we will find you and deport you.

Lee said:

There is nothing historically that compares with that. Congress has not authorized deportation for attending protests.

In defending the administration’s actions, DOJ (Department of Justice) lawyer Ethan Kanter insisted that “there is no injury that is cognizable” and that plaintiffs’ fears were speculative. He argued that the executive orders merely direct agencies to gather information and that there was no explicit instruction to criminalize speech. Judge Coombe, however, noted the serious implications of Stanley’s declaration and the administration’s monitoring practices.

In a sharp exchange, Lee responded that it is precisely this combination—executive orders, public threats and agency surveillance—that is chilling free speech.

Lee responded:

If the government wanted only to use existing authority, there would be no need for these orders.

The stakes could not be higher. As Lee stressed, the case has enormous implications for millions of international students and immigrants in the United States:

The government is saying to 1.1 million student visa holders: If you criticize the administration, you will be detained and deported.

The case laid bare how Trump’s administration is seeking to create a precedent: that the president can revoke visas and deport individuals based purely on their political views, and that such actions are immune from judicial review.

Facing imminent detention, deportation or possible transfer to prisons like El Salvador’s CECOT mega-prison, Taal was forced to leave the United States. In a powerful statement issued after his departure, Taal wrote:

Trump did not want me to have my day in court. Given what we have seen across the United States, I have lost faith that a favorable ruling from the courts would guarantee my personal safety and ability to express my beliefs.

Taal’s persecution must be seen within the broader context of Trump’s dictatorship drive. Peaceful protesters like Mahmoud Khalil and Rümeyza Öztürk have been abducted. Mass deportations under the Alien Enemies Act are proceeding in defiance of court rulings. Those already deported to El Salvador include individuals labeled as “gang members” based on nothing more than tattoos and hearsay. The administration has declared that because deportees are no longer in US custody, courts have no jurisdiction to intervene.



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